

Tributes to Roy Branson

La Chayim—to Roy's Life

“The only decent thing to do now is to die,” joked Roy Branson on September 19, 1998, after ninety minutes of accolades had been heaped upon him during a special service at Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland marking his 23 years as editor of *Spectrum*. In addition to the regular members of his Sabbath School class, people had come from across the country to pay tribute to what he accomplished for Adventism through the journal. Given that he led that Sabbath School class for nearly as many years as he edited *Spectrum*, the class provided an appropriate forum at which to discuss the Association of Adventist Forums' journal and its editor.

Creation of the magazine was a realization of an idea that Branson wrote about as a senior English major at Atlantic Union College in 1959. After graduation he moved to Michigan and began work on two masters degrees—one at Andrews University in theology and one at the University of Chicago in English—both of which he completed in 1961. While in graduate school, he began discussing his idea for a magazine with the people whom he met there. The concept of the journal, as recorded in the first issue was, “to encourage Seventh-day Adventist participation in the discussion of contemporary issues from a Christian viewpoint, to look without prejudice to all sides of a subject, to evaluate the merits of diverse views and to foster Christian intellectual and cultural growth.” While looking for a doctoral program, Branson talked with more people at Berkeley, Harvard and in Southern California. In 1967, several groups of people that were meeting in various parts of the country joined to become the Association of Adventist Forums (AAF). The Association decided to make the journal concept proposed by Branson a reality. A meeting was set to consider the magazine with officials from the church. “It was important for the denomination to recognize the journal, so that the faculty at Adventist colleges could write for it,” Branson said. In 1969, the *Review* noted the debut of this new publi-

cation. Dr. Mollerous Couperus was chosen to be the first editor. Meanwhile, Branson enrolled in a doctoral program at Harvard. While there he was invited to join the faculty at Andrews University, which he did in 1967, completing his Ph.D. in religious ethics at Harvard in 1968.

Richard Rice remembers Branson's classes at Andrews University from that time. “Nothing pleased Roy more than a frank disagreement among his students in class. He not only permitted us to challenge one another, he encouraged it. In fact, he egged us on. The stronger the confrontation, the happier Roy was.”

That seven years later Branson should become the editor of a magazine known for its vigorous discussion of issues was thus most appropriate. He began his editing career with Charles Scriven as a co-editor. Together, the two of them changed the look of the publication from that of an academic journal to a more contemporary magazine. Three years later, Scriven departed. Branson expanded the content of the journal adding news about the denomination. By providing an independent voice within Adventism, the journal acted as the “Fourth Estate” for the church. The value of *Spectrum's* independence was demonstrated over



Photo: Courtesy of Bronwen Larson

“Roy and I haven't always agreed on some things . . . but we've always been friends.” —Neal Wilson, former GC president

and over as the journal tackled topics such as the legal cases against the church (Mary Kay Silver and Davenport), thorough historical examination of Ellen White and her writings, and theological controversies. (For further discussion of the journal's history, see the 25th anniversary edition). Branson also consolidated all phases of the journal's production in Takoma Park, when he moved to Washington, D.C. and joined the Ethics Institute at Georgetown University. Previously it had been edited, at various times, in Loma Linda, St. Helena, and Walla Walla.

With the support of the AAF and the church's academics, the journal grew. Its readers became a special community within Adventism, and no one valued that community more highly than Branson.

In 1996, on the 25th anniversary of the journal, the AAF met in San Diego and honored Branson with a roast. There were many laughs as first Richard Rice and then Jonathan Butler honored/lambasted him.

Rice began by asking, "What can you say in a few short minutes to summarize the life of someone who epitomizes so much that you admire? Someone who combines loyalty to the church with intellectual honesty? Respect for the past with



Photo: Courtesy of Bronwen Larson

"Your vision of a thoughtful, honest and faithful church has encouraged scores of writers and thousands of readers." (from an inscription on the plaque presented to Roy Branson by Les Pitton, former AAF president, on behalf of the members and friends of the Association of Adventist Forums)

imagination for the future? Probative power with personal warmth? Clarity of expression with originality of thought? How can you capture the life and career of someone who is not just a personality, but an institution? I don't know. But that's not our problem tonight. We're here to talk about Roy Branson. . . ."

"One of the things that has always impressed me about Roy is his ability to converse with people. Roy can talk to anyone, in public, in their area of expertise. He is completely unintimidated by position or reputation. Where others show reverence, Roy is merely courteous. While others are applauding, Roy is rising to ask a question. He will query anybody in any venue. No speaker is too important for Roy to interrogate. Roy makes Mike Wallace seem retiring. I have seen him question Martin Marty, David Tracy, Gordon Kaufman. If you say it, Roy has a question about it."

Butler joked about Branson's family history. He said, "There's a true story: once when Roy was a child at camp meeting, his grandfather, (General Conference President) W. H. Branson, his father (a conference president) and he were on the campgrounds at the same time. They were known as the Father, the Son and the Holy Terror. . . ."

"What has always appealed to me about Roy is his appetite. His zest to feed off the world around him. He takes it all in—politics, literature, art, culture—if they were calories he'd weigh a ton. He's been a skinny Chesterton. Had he been narrower in range, with a blander palate, he might have accomplished more of one thing. But the church has been his magnificent obsession. He's been a teacher, a writer, an editor, an activist, a mover and shaker, exploding in all directions. And the church has benefited from his attention deficit disorder."

"Some people never get to hear such kind words said about them," Branson noted after the special Sabbath School program in Takoma Park. "I've now had the privilege twice."

—Bonnie Dwyer

Bonnie Dwyer has written for *Spectrum* since 1977.

Blazing Adventist

I first heard about Roy Branson during my senior year of college, when one of my friends claimed that the grandson of the former General Conference president was getting his doctorate at Harvard.

Had the rumor been that he was moving up in the Dodger farm system. . . then I would have been impressed!

In those days my world, especially my intellectual world, was small. I was majoring in theology and biblical languages; from a narrow band of knowledge, I was getting mostly information: answers, not questions. One professor did make American history an adventure, and destabilized my politics. Another, a journalism teacher, terrified me with her relentless and exacting standards, and thereby sparked a love of sentences and paragraphs and ideas. Still, I could not yet appreciate the worth and pleasure of mind-changing education. I could not know fully how much fun it would be to learn under great teachers at a truly great university.

A year and a half later, at the start of my second fall semester at the Andrews University Seminary, I took a class from Roy Branson. Now the man I knew from rumor had earned the degree at his storied university and come to where I was.

He upended my life. All the while he kept it steady.

I had studied the Sabbath School lessons, learned the memory verses—even read the thunderous biblical prophets. But until I sat in a circle with Roy Branson, until I took the jolt of the books he assigned—the one by Michael Harrington on poverty, the one by C. Vann Woodward on the Jim Crow laws, the one by H. Richard Niebuhr on Christ and culture—until that happened, and I wrote the papers and struggled through the classroom crossfire, I didn't understand how revolutionary the Bible is, how it bears on politics as well as private life, how it alters all of consciousness, not just the pious corners. This new teacher threw open a door the seminary, then a startling place, was already cracking open, and I saw how liberating it can be to overcome a prejudice or embrace a new idea.

I've tested orthodoxies ever since—not just for the fun (it is fun) but also for the truth. As an

Adventist, after all, I know, or know now, that truth lies always ahead of me, and I must strain after it or betray my hope. I know now that I-have-the-answers-I'll-never-budge fundamentalism is the denial of true Adventism: when you freeze in your tracks you're not marching to Zion.

Roy Branson, a blazing Adventist, taught me this, too. That's how he steadied the life he upended. He said, "Yes," to my heritage—and saw it as a heritage, not only of audacious mission, but also of audacious learning. I could grow in my church, not just grow away from it.

Many others made, and make, a difference. But Roy has lit more fires than most, animated more lives than most. Now, in his new work as advocate at the Center for Law and Public Policy, and as teacher at Columbia Union College, he's still lighting fires and animating lives.

My acquaintance with him started in his classroom, where the challenge of learning was as sweet as cake. I became Roy's friend and sometime colleague and if it would be grandiose to say the rest is history, it's certainly been a lot like history: dreams attained or deferred, ideas embraced or dismissed, people healed or hurt, communities built up or beaten down. It's been an adventure, and perhaps I should say the succeeding years have been the frosting on the. . . .

No, it hasn't been that easy, or that perfect. The man who edited *Spectrum* for twenty-five years comes warts and all, same as the rest of us. So does his church, with its penchant for hyperorthodoxy and its fear of Scripture and discipleship. Meanwhile, the surrounding popular culture remains a supermarket of clueless desire and lost dignity.

What Roy Branson has fought for during his entire life still matters more than anything: the Gospel in word and deed, and the church, despite imperfection, upholding it to all. For that long fight, and for the fighter, I am glad and grateful.

—Charles Scriven

Charles Scriven is president of Columbia Union College. He has served as co-editor of *Spectrum*, pastor of Sligo SDA Church and professor at Walla Walla College. He is the author of *The Transformation of Culture: Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr*.

The Intrepid Editor

As editor of *Spectrum* since 1975, Roy Branson has expanded its interests, enlarged its readership, and extended its influence in the Adventist community of faith. For what *Spectrum* has become, and for what it has accomplished, Roy is largely responsible.

A vigorously independent, intellectually responsible, and thoroughly Adventist publication, *Spectrum* has done what no other publication could do, uniquely enriching the lives and thinking of Adventists. It has been a place where important and constructive conversation has occurred. It has encouraged and facilitated some of the most creative Adventist thinking, and given it a voice. It has opened up new possibilities of theological understanding; it has identified issues which need attention; it has been a model of responsible criticism of official policies and actions that are unjust or unwise.

All of this reflects the person Roy is. A born teacher, he has made *Spectrum* a marvelous means of instruction through which we all have learned. It is difficult to identify anyone in the last third of the twentieth century who has cared more about our community of faith or made a longer-lasting contribution to it. Inevitably the object of short-spirited and sometimes mean-spirited criticism, Roy and *Spectrum* remain shining examples of Adventism at its best—authentic, hopeful, passionate, and progressive.

—Fritz Guy

The name of Fritz Guy, now university professor of theology and philosophy at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, has been listed in every issue of *Spectrum*—as assistant editor, associate editor or consulting editor. He continues to contribute essays in Adventist theology.

If Roy Were a Dessert. . .

If Roy Branson were a dessert, what would he be? To answer that question and several other creative questions, 70 or so friends and colleagues took the following quiz during the September 19, 1998 service at Sligo Church commemorating Roy Branson's 23 years of editorship of *Spectrum*. Here are the results of that quiz:

1. If he were a vehicle, which of the following would Roy Branson be?

Rolls Royce	10
Jaguar	24
Dodge Durango	24
Peterbilt (16 wheeler)	15
French Deux Cheveaux	1

2. If he were one of the Beatles, which of the following would Roy Branson be?

George Harrison	4
John Lennon	22
Ringo Starr	12
Paul McCartney	31
The Manager	1

3. If he were a dessert, which of the following would Roy Branson be?

German Chocolate Cake	20
French Crepe	9
Italian Spumoni	19
English Trifle	26

4. If he were an actor, which of the following would Roy Branson be?

Robin Williams	21
Tom Hanks	21
John Travolta	11
Liam Neeson	19
Paul Newman	1

5. If he were a hymn, which of the following would Roy Branson be?

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"	25
"When All My Labors and Trials Are O'er"	4
"Stand Like the Brave"	39
"How Great Thou Art"	8

The Open Heart

I first met Roy in 1988, when I came to work at *Spectrum* as an editorial assistant. My family was, of course, concerned about the influence of the liberals and cynics of *Spectrum*, thinking I would come to no good end. But truth be told, I was already in full flight from the narrowness and humorless oddity that I thought of as Adventism.

Roy really bothered me. He was clearly intelligent and curious. He was not humorless or narrow, and he was still an Adventist. That made me nervous. But I was confident that eventually I would happen upon some part of his intelligence that he had hobbled or shut away. I was troubled that I had not found that blind spot quickly. I have certain blind spots of my own, and it took me about five years to see what should have been clear.

That was 1993, a lively time for reporting news in Adventism. The smoke from David Koresh's compound had barely cleared the Waco horizon. David Mould and his Laymen for Religious Liberty had recently finished papering Florida and Colorado with billboards trumpeting Ellen White's "truth" about the Pope. If my memory serves correctly, we already had in hand an article by Dr. Gilbert Burnham predicting the havoc that AIDS would wreck in Africa, and chiding Adventists for their non-response to it. That essay served, of course, to foreshadow the coming carnage in Rwanda and the subsequent non-response by Adventists. It was business as usual as far as I was concerned.

But then only days before we were to go to press with that issue, Roy burst into my office with a fax in one hand and tears in his eyes. The fax reported a story coming out of besieged Sarajevo. Some Adventists had taken it upon themselves to maintain a postal service there, blind to political or religious affiliations. They managed this, according to a report in the *Washington Post*, because they were religious outsiders—"nobody's and everybody's." Even I had to admit that

was a lovely turn of phrase. It wasn't much of a feature story, by most standards. Even after we appended the two columns from the *Washington Post*, the story only filled two pages in the journal. But it was good news after a long spell of bad, and if you look in the October, 1993 issue, you will see that Roy led off the issue with that story.

And it dawned on me then that Roy's allegiance to Adventism was not because he closed down some part of his intellect, but because he could not close down some portion of his heart.

—Chip Cassano

Chip Cassano, a graduate of Columbia Union College, received his M.A. in writing from Johns Hopkins University. He works as a writer and editor for the University System of Maryland and teaches creative writing at Columbia Union College. He was *Spectrum's* assistant editor from 1991 through the spring of 1998.

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